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Checking Intelligence

The opinion of Allen Dulles, former director of the Central Intelligence Agency, that there is no need for more controls on this country's intelligence effort, carries a great deal of weight, because of his personal integrity and his long professional experience.

Nevertheless, his exhaustive and capable discussion of the work of the CIA, in the Encyclopedia Britannica, will not eliminate anxiety about the role of the agency. It is true that the CIA operates under the President, the Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of State, and that its work is under the scrutiny of the President's Board of Consultants on Foreign Intelligence Activities which meets several times a year, and that its appropriations pass through the Budget Bureau and the Congressional appropriations committees. None of these devices provides a day to day check on operations and all of them together have not been sufficient to prevent CIA operations at cross purposes with those of persons supposed to be carrying out American policy abroad.

There have been instances in Egypt, in South-east Asia, in South America and even in Europe, in which such conflicts have been exhibited. Ambassadors have been hindered and embarrassed by the "spooks" who have been attached in times past to their embassies but who have operated almost entirely outside their direction.

Nor is it completely reassuring to say that CIA agents never get involved in policy. The decision to seek information by clandestine means often is, in itself, a policy decision. The failures of intelligence gathering operations sometimes shape policy itself, in wholly unplanned ways. The U-2 episode in the Soviet Union is only the most dramatic illustration of the impact of intelligence activities on policy. And even where the primary intelligence mission is successful—diplomatic risks and costs are involved that may be disproportionate to the intelligence gained.

The congressional watchdog committee recommended by the Hoover Commission was decisively rejected by Congress in 1956 and it may not be the answer now. The other checks enumerated by Mr. Dulles, are not the whole answer either. The President and members of his Cabinet can give only infrequent and crisis attention to the task. The Budget Bureau can give fund allocation close scrutiny but it is hardly in position to criticize actual field operations, or even to criticize appropriations when its experts turn out to be former CIA officials. The appropriation procedures of Congress afford no administrative control of day-to-day enterprises.

No objective person could read Mr. Dulles' formidable defense of the CIA without acquiring the conviction that the organization is of the greatest importance to the country's survival. Many will be convinced that it is so important that it cannot be left to carry out espionage, subversion and information functions all over the world without more continuous direction from the very highest level of the Government apparatus.